Guitar Legends

Whether it's the melodic sound of an Eric Clapton solo or the growl of a heavy metal band, the electric guitar has influenced popular music and culture more than any other instrument. Rock's greatest musicians have always been closely identified with their guitars. But the instruments being designed for tomorrow's pop stars may look and sound rather different from today's familiar electric and acoustic guitars.

It is only sixty years since the electric guitar was invented. Since then there have been incredible changes to the technical design of the instrument. From what was once a rounded wooden box with a hole in the front, the guitar has evolved into the smooth solid body of the rock guitarist's "axe". The most modern guitars are really computer-controlled synthesizers.

Adolph Rickenbacker's Electro String Company produced the world's first guitar. It was made of wood and played on the user's lap. The first real breakthrough in design came in 1950 when Leo Fender, a Californian radio repairman, made the first solid-bodied electric guitar, the Fender Telecaster. Soon after the inventor Les Paul made the famous Gibson Les Paul. Fender launched its stylish Stratocaster two years later. These guitars became standard instrument against which newer guitar designs are measured.

All sorts of different materials have been used to make guitars. Acoustic guitars are made from wood, which gives a soft tone. Wood is also a popular material in electric guitar manufacture, but more modern materials such as glass and carbon fibre are also used. There have also been guitars with metal bodies and necks though these were never popular with players, who claim metal feels cold in the hand.

Plastics, on the other hand, have been more used in guitar bodies. A company that makes parts for the aerospace industry has begun to use a kind of fibreglass that was originally used in helicopter blades to make the bodies for its electric-acoustic instruments. Other makers have begun to experiment with graphite, a material that is ten times stiffer than wood but much lighter. It doesn't expand or contract as the temperature or humidity changes either. This makes it particularly suitable for guitar necks and for tennis rockets, for which it is also used.

As long as scientists and musicians work together harmoniously, the electric guitar will continue to benefit from technological innovations. But for all the efforts of the guitar companies' design engineers, production managers and quality controllers, it's the musicians who finally make the instruments sing – and not necessarily in the way the guitar maker intended.

Choose the correct alternative to answer the following questions.

1. What is likely to change in the future?
    a) the influence of the guitar on popular culture
    b) styles of guitar music
    c) the guitars themselves
    d) how musicians feel about their guitars

2. The first electric guitar was
    a) computer-controlled.
    b) played sitting down.
    c) not hollow inside.
    d) designed by Leo Fender.

3. The guitars that were designed in the fifties
    a) were unsuccessful.
    b) are often compared to guitars designed today.
    c) were made of wood.
    d) were played sitting down.

4. Which material was disliked by musicians?
    a) metal
    b) wood
    c) plastic
    d) carbon fibre

5. Why is graphite a good material for guitar necks?
    a) It has been used for tennis rockets.
    b) It is heavier than wood.

c) It is more flexible than wood.

d) It is not affected by atmospheric conditions.

6. Recent technological innovations

a) have not really improved the electric guitar.

b) have been ignored by musicians.

c) cannot determine the way the guitar will be played.

d) are not what musicians hoped for.

Bibliography:

Burgess Sally, Acklam Richard, *First Certificate Gold Exam Maximiser with Key*, England and Associated Companies throughout the world: Pearson Education Limited, 2000, *Unit 7 The price of fame*, s. 54-55.